Blog: Immersion Community Engagement and Development Strategy

For centuries, Indigenous peoples have been creating, innovating, and adapting. Our Indigenous worldviews of relationality, abundance, and custodianship often guide us in this creation and innovation. Across regions and Tribal Nations, there are numerous examples of Indigenous models and schools that are predicated on these worldviews. In the Native American Language Resource Center's (NALRC) first Summer Series webinar, "Overview of Creating an Immersion School," Andrea Dias-Machado shared one example of how relationality guided her school's development strategy. Her group's immersion program — opening this fall — is a school within a school model that offers place-based Hawaiian language and culture instruction for secondary students. The new school, Ke Kula Kaiapuni o Kapolei, was formed from a grassroots movement that took connectedness to heart.

Ke Kula Kaiapuni o Kapolei's creation underscores our propensity for creation through a worldview that holds fast to the importance of storytelling and relationship. The school was championed by parents through the group EAducation, who shared data with the state government through story to garner support and resources for the school. An important tool in the weaving of this story was focus groups. EAducation conducted focus groups with alumni and parents from a nearby immersion elementary school to inform reports that were shared with stakeholders.

Focus Groups

Focus groups often guide discussion to inform the creation of a product or service or to provide ongoing feedback. It is one way immersion practitioners can engage their community during the development process. To decide who to invite to the group, reflect on your group's mission, vision, and intended audience. For creating an immersion school, students, families, governments, and school personnel may be intended audiences at some point. To ensure that the groups created are thoughtful and comprehensive, stakeholder mapping can be effective. Stakeholder mapping is a design thinking tool that guides you through a comprehensive look at key relationships, people, and groups in a community. Ideally, a focus group should include 8 to 10 community members to provide a large enough sampling of stakeholders but not so large that it prevents robust discussion. You will want to develop questions or a discussion guide beforehand to ensure that you get the data and input you need. Efforts to engage with the community should be relevant and purpose driven. Additional prep work could include identifying different activity types that could be used to vary feedback, such as role plays or asking participants to put items in order of importance to them. In a focus group session, it is suggested that you begin with norms or co-create norms with participants before moving on to the planned discussion questions.

For ongoing feedback, the Circles of Reflection model being piloted by the U.S. Department of Education's Region 17 Comprehensive Center (CC) could be used as a structure. According to the Region 17 CC, Circles of Reflection aims to engage "SEA staff in rich, reflective discussions and strategic planning with tribal communities and school leaders to create school environments where Native students thrive." In the first circle, discussion is

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centered around the associated Reflection Questions Worksheet and focuses on perspectives on current efforts. In the second circle, the same group of participants reflects on the first discussion. From there, priority topics can be taken back to the school, Tribe, or agency to gather input from additional stakeholders. The final circle is dedicated to reviewing all information gathered and using that to plan actionable next steps. This model could be implemented during the planning stages for a new school as well as throughout its development.

Readiness Assessments

After the community has been engaged, need has been identified and communicated, and foundational decisions about immersion type and school model have been made as discussed in Session 2, "Thinking Through Your Options – Finding the Right Fit," the core working group should perform an initial readiness assessment. Readiness describes the degree to which a community can act on an issue or establish a new program. Often, programs or services are implemented prior to adequate development or before the community understands and can support them. A readiness assessment can prevent this. It will help you determine what components are in place to support a new immersion school as well as what components are still needed before launch. Performing one of these assessments can help guide other aspects of developing a new immersion school, including ongoing community engagement and forming strategic partnerships.

To assist with conducting a readiness assessment, we have provided a sample readiness assessment based on research by the University of Kansas and Dr. Clarisse Mendoza from Columbia University. In the example assessment, there are five internal factors and six external considerations for forming an immersion school.

The five internal factors are:
→ Identity
→ Decision Making
→ Finance
→ Personnel
→ Curriculum

These are areas that the core working group has primary control over. Though the group may choose to engage partners in one or more of these areas, the group should be able to address low readiness related to one of these factors internally.

The six external factors are:
→ Language Expertise
→ Federal and State Policy
→ Stakeholder Interest
→ Facilities
→ Partnerships
→ Sustainability Potential

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These are areas where the core working group's sphere(s) of influence may vary. If there is low readiness in one or more external factor, the group will likely need to form partnerships or conduct targeted advocacy to initiate change in that area. For instance, if there is a low degree of language expertise in the broader community, partnerships at the state and tribal levels may be critical to increase adult fluency and pathways for language teacher certification.

The initial assessment should inform immediate next steps. When considering next steps, keep in mind that some of the factors will likely inform one another. For instance, if an area of continued development focus is Partnerships, then Sustainability Potential would likely be an area of focus as well. Once you've completed the readiness assessment, you can use it to solicit ongoing feedback from stakeholders and to refine your plan of action for any areas of opportunity. It is recommended that this assessment be conducted multiple times throughout the development process.

Conclusion

While resources and ideas like these will be presented throughout the Summer Series to help jump-start community engagement and development strategy for a new immersion school, remember that every school and community has its own unique story. In Andrea Dias-Machado's case, focus groups helped guide her planning and conversations with potential partners. In the charter school world, a version of a readiness assessment has been used to determine and communicate readiness once initial planning has taken place. Across the education landscape and Indian Country, there are examples like these that we can lean on as we continue revitalizing our languages and passing them down for generations to come.

Resources

[Hawaiian Language Immersion Schools](#)

[Consortium for Public Education's Design Thinking for Education (Ep. 8: Stakeholder Mapping)](#)

[National Comprehensive Center's Circles of Reflection Facilitation Guide](#)

[STEP Grant Circles of Reflection Video](#) and [Resources](#)

[Native American Language Resource Center (NALRC) Readiness Assessment](#)

For more on creating an immersion school, join the Office of Indian Education for the Native American Language Resource Center's (NALRC's) [*Summer Series: How to Create an Immersion School*](#).